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Reflections on Teacher Prep: Research and Rigor at the REACH Institute
An Interview with Ben Sanders, Executive Director of the Reach Institute
Conducted by Jane Henzerling, Fellow

The Reach Institute for School Leadership is an independent, non-profit educational institution in Oakland, California, that trains approximately 50 teaching candidates and 50 school leaders each year. Reach's mission is to improve schools by improving instruction, fostered by providing rigorous, relevant, and applied pathways and preparation for exceptional teaching & leadership. The Reach Institute develops and supports teachers and educational leaders who are committed to creating and sustaining effective urban schools with its teacher and administrator credentialing programs and master's degrees.

JH: What sources have informed the design and implementation of Reach's programs for teacher and school leader development?

BS: Our guiding practices are drawn out of the literature on effective adult learning and effective leadership as well as our own practical experience. We consistently try to marry research and practice. How can we help our participants make sense of theory and big ideas in terms of how they impact day-to-day practice? Bridging this long-standing gap between theory and practice is one of our driving goals. In fact, it's really a "meta-goal" for us – it's an operating principle in our programmatic work as well. How can we inform our own program design with research and theory that are continually emerging as well as with our own practice experience? My colleagues who design specific programs are diligent about continually revising their work. That's driven by an inquiry-based approach, which is a major practice in which we also engage our participants. Asking questions, trying to understand the larger picture within which a problem might be based, and then zooming in on how you can solve practical problems.

Our master's program for school administrators is centered around an action research project in which participants go through a rigorous analytic process that is ultimately focused on a problem of their own practice. They do an exhaustive lit review to find out what other people think and what the field at large says about that problem, which helps frame a theory of action. They then come up with an actual intervention, create a data collection mechanism, test it out and evaluate the impact. We work to instill an inquiry-approach mindset and ensure our participants carry it forward into their work. Our alumni often say that it's a way they now think about the world and think about problems in a more formalized way.

A key practice that distinguishes Reach from other programs is having faculty members observe and coach our participants one-on-one on a consistent basis. The value of having a faculty member who is a

coach helps participants advance their own practice, and our faculty members say that it keeps them connected to the reality of their students' day-to-day work, so it informs the way they design their programs.

JH: How do the people designing Reach's programs select and vet the research they're pulling from to determine what is worth using?

BS: Our lead faculty members have rigorous research backgrounds themselves; they have instilled in them a deep knowledge of the literature -- foundational work by people like Grant Wiggins, Jay McTighe, and Madeline Hunter -- and an understanding of what makes things empirically valid. They design programs and teach collaboratively, so they are able to give each other feedback and weigh in on the research base being used. One priority is to create more space for our faculty members to do not only what they always do, which is to keep abreast of the research and have it inform their practice, but actually to enable them to engage in a more formal research agenda. Maintaining a traditional graduate school research mindset is important because it keeps the faculty embedded in the research. Another related priority is to facilitate is more convenings and engagement with world-class thinkers like Ann Lieberman from Stanford, who has written prolifically about teacher development, and Phil Darrow, with whom we've been working on implementing math standards. That's one of the assets that I've been able to bring to Reach: I've been in the work long enough that I have connections to many leaders in the field who have a particular interest in the work we're doing. It's important for us to be informed by the leading edge of research.

JH: How do you measure the effectiveness of your programs and the teachers and school leaders emerging from them? From what evidence base do you draw to determine what's working?

BS: In the world of WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges, an accrediting commission), it's called institutional research – researching yourself and how effective you're being. It's woven into the fiber of what we do. We triangulate our data sources: surveys of participants at mid- and end-of-year; learning outcomes, which include rubrics and tools for measuring participants' performance relative to clearly defined expectations; and focus groups of participants and alumni. One specific way we evaluate performance outcomes is by analyzing videos of participants teaching and coaching, which allows faculty members to determine how well they are learning not only based on their conventional written graduate work, but by looking at videos to see if they are applying key principles in practice. We aggregate rubric scores, so we can look at learning outcome aggregates and see what is working in our training and coaching and what's not. Focus groups enable us to collect information regarding Reach's impact on our participants' work in schools during their tenure in the program and as alumni. It's not the most rigorous methodology but gives us a sense of our effectiveness anecdotally.

JH: Tell me more about the substance of the learning outcomes and rubrics: What are the core skills, competencies, and bases of knowledge that Reach believes are essential to having an effectively prepared teacher?

BS: For me, it always starts with, "Do you have enough depth of academic content knowledge to be in a position to be an effective teacher?" Obviously pedagogy, instructional strategies, and an

understanding of how to create lesson plans are critically important, but they have to be connected to depth of content knowledge. Without that, we often see teachers who are on a shaky foundation. That's become more and more apparent as we look at the math reform work we've been undertaking in helping folks makes sense of and implement the Common Core Math Standards: there's an immediate recognition that you cannot fake it, you have to understand the math. That's a challenge for us, because much of our focus during the relatively short amount of time we have people is on the pedagogy and the skills and dispositions of a teacher, whether it's classroom management, planning, or assessing, all of those conventional things. It's difficult to ensure people have the content-specific pedagogy that they need to be effective. We provide content-specific seminars to try to fill those gaps.

Another key competency is an inquiry mindset. Our teachers conduct projects that require them to go through improvement cycles (PTAR: Plan, Teach, Assess, Review/Revise/Reflect). That's a habit of mind we prioritize, so teachers aren't just teaching day to day but are also assessing and asking questions about how effective their instruction is in helping students make the growth they need to make, and if they're not making the growth, then asking why and what can I do differently. We know we can't teach them everything they need to know in the short time they're with us, so we're trying to equip them with the skills that will enable them to continue to develop over time. That relates to a larger conversation about whether they end up in school environments that support their continual growth and connects to the leadership side of our work, in which we're saying to our leaders: You need to create an environment in which teachers are supported to do ongoing, inquiry-based improvement work.

JH: What's the impact of state policies on Reach's work and your approach?

BS: We operate an intern credential program for people with bachelor's degrees seeking to enter the teaching profession, but we are planning to take on a more hybrid approach, specifically a residency model. The state credentialing requirements drive some of the design of the intern credential program: the intern teachers must be placed as the teacher of record for at least part of the day over the two years of our program. That's a mixed bag in that, obviously as a teacher in training you want to have plenty of opportunities for authentic practice, where there isn't someone always looking over your shoulder, but the challenge is that it's an awful lot to take on as a novice. It's a challenge to attend to the content knowledge sufficiently and go into depth given the time limitations of the program. This goes to a larger question about the amount of time that we assume teachers require to become eligible for a preliminary credential (a five-year California teaching license that our participants are eligible for following successful completion of the two-year intern program). A lot of people reference the way doctors are prepared, not that it's a perfect analogy, but it's an example on the other end of the spectrum. There is an assumption that you're being deeply prepared before you're ever allowed to act like a doctor, and as a society we're willing to invest in that. It's expensive, it takes a long time. We are still in a way limited, victimized almost, by this mindset that it only takes one or two years to become a teacher. That really hurts the profession.

JH: How do you think state policy could support a more rigorous model for teacher training and preparation?

BS: I think shifting the credentialing pathway to a phased, multi-tiered approach could be a solution. You begin as a pure novice, you focus deeply on building your content knowledge and your understanding of instruction, and then you infuse increasing amounts of practice. I believe it should entail maintaining that professional learning piece as a fundamental part of a teacher's development. The idea that you're exclusively teaching full-time by your second year and maybe dabbling in a little Professional Learning Community work or a little collective planning is not sufficient; it needs to be more substantive, there needs to be sufficient time dedicated to continual growth. The mindset that you could be trained to be an effective teacher in one or two years is a fallacy that we need to address. It's not a California-specific thing, it's an American thing. I feel like we're making progress in recognizing that meaningful professional learning has to be built into the work, but it's more talk than reality so far.

JH: As a degree-granting and credential-granting institution, how does state leadership impact what you have to do to be able to carry out your mission and implement your programs?

BS: The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing is our primary regulatory agency, and that agency's role is informed by whoever is sitting in the superintendent's seat. The state board of education has a key role as well. We have to operate within their adopted policies. I don't want to say that they're not helpful in terms of the work that we do, but there's no doubt that there's a regulatory approach that sets the bar at a low level. Then there's the reality of the market arena. The state wouldn't mind if we did more preparation – deeper would be better – but there's the reality of how long our students could afford not to be employed, the debt they would have to assume, and the teacher shortage we're facing. People need folks to come teach in their schools.

Reach has a focus on intellectual rigor, and there are state-required tests that a small subset of our teacher preparation program candidates struggle to pass. It's a challenging paradox in the sense that these candidates are products of our existing public education system; clearly not all school systems are preparing future potential teachers with the foundations they'll need to be successful. On the one hand, we owe it to the profession to maintain high and lofty intellectual expectations – teaching is intellectual work. On the other, there's the reality that we want to have people able to access the profession who are reflective of the communities where they'll teach. It's Reach's mission to bring non-traditional candidates into the field. I'm not in favor of lowering the bar for entry; if anything I'd like to see us raise it, with the recognition that people may need support to meet the expectations.

There is a significant financial burden on new teachers, especially given the cost of living in the Bay Area. We keep tuition low to ensure access to our program, but we still have to pay our bills. The idea that people would come out of a teacher preparation program with substantial debt, or any debt at all, given the fact that we know they won't be making a huge amount of money – that's a structural problem. People have been pointing to other countries like Finland and saying that if you're highly motivated to become a teacher and you demonstrate academic prowess, we should pay for it. No debt, you get a fellowship to become a teacher. That seems to be a state or federal policy that could make a huge impact. It could be something that a state took on as a funding and programmatic priority.

It's the absence of that type of leadership that we feel.

JH: You mentioned a phased model for teacher preparation, and then making professional learning a lifetime part of a teacher's role. You also mentioned the challenge of people not being prepared with the baseline knowledge required to teach content effectively. To flesh out these ideas, what would be the ideal path from undergraduate through becoming a classroom teacher?

BS: In California, years ago it was determined that you needed a Bachelor's degree in a content area (not education) and then a fifth year of rigorous pedagogical training (though, unlike in some states, not a master's degree). I'm torn: On the one hand, I believe that the more intellectual content exploration you have as an undergrad, the better. On the other hand, teaching is very complex. It's not sufficient to be knowledgeable about your content. You have to have a deep understanding of everything we know about cognition, learning science, pedagogy. I would argue for a liberal arts education as the foundation, but in addition there should be a longer experience in the process of teaching. The ultimate goal is for teachers to have the depth of content knowledge and the skills in teaching. Those things need to be married rigorously and then you need chances over the course of your career to deepen that knowledge.

One of the things we have struggled with as a country is that we have yet to document what high-quality teaching looks like. If I'm being taught to do something, I want to know what that thing is. And we're peculiarly ineffective at articulating what that thing is. There are certainly efforts to provide frameworks for what constitutes effective teaching, like the work of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the California Standards for the Teaching Profession, but they're generic enough that it creates the space for people to be able to say "I do that," but to what end, how effectively, what does it look like in practice? There is an existential problem in these efforts: we use language to try to capture reality. That language is inherently an abstraction. We need different ways -- perhaps including video -- of documenting and explicating standards of practice and a means of maintaining accountability to them.

I also think that to be truly effective, teaching standards would need to be content specific. I see the Common Core as a potential means to an effort to identify what highly effective instruction really looks like. It takes many different forms, but let's do a better job of documenting that in different settings so we can say, these are the kinds of instruction that research says are effective. We're preparing people to do this thing that we haven't sufficiently defined. That, to me, is one of the biggest problems. At Reach we encourage folks to identify a "model of instruction." It helps the individual know what to strive towards, and then provides a coaching model that can help them get better at that. If you're a violinist, you can go to the symphony and hear world-class violin music. You can buy an album, you can go to YouTube. You can see it and hear it and be coached to perform it. In teaching, it's very hard to find good examples of really effective teaching. It's a problem for the individual and it's also a problem for schools. There's research behind the idea that instructional coherence, in and of itself, is a good thing. But how can you have coherence when the vision is not clear? The field has a long way to go.

JH: What are we training toward? We don't have a common definition of what success looks like.

BS: That means that schools of education are pushing people in a general direction, but effective pedagogy requires those moments of deeper learning. At Reach, we adopted the approach of the instructional core, which comes primarily from Richard Elmore at Harvard, this idea that it's the relationship of the student and the teacher around the content. That's what we should really focus on. But still, what does that *look* like? How do you create those sparks of learning when you can tell that the kids got it? We need to get better at figuring out what creates the conditions when kids have those epiphanies.

One of the big challenges with teaching is that you're so isolated. Isolation is the enemy of improvement. We have folks that are unclear about what they're trying to do, and they're trying to figure out this thing they're unclear about by themselves. That's not the way to build a world-class education system. That's not the way to compete with other countries that have definitely identified what, for them at least, is effective pedagogy, and have created truly collaborative professional learning environments. We have a lot of work to do to catch up. At least we now know more about where we want to go and are seeing some interesting progress. There are encouraging efforts like the Mills Teacher Scholars Program and intensive professional learning communities, like those Reach is facilitating, that provide dedicated time and financial resources for teachers to engage in deep pedagogical study and significant action research.

JH: There's a focus in pockets. You see singular examples of people trying to define and capture these core ideas, but they haven't taken root as a national priority across the education sector.

BS: I do feel that state policy, certainly in California, is not reflective of these issues. Visionary leadership at the state level would say, if isolation is the enemy of improvement, and we're interested in improvement, then we need to create meaningful collaboration. If you need to know your content in order to teach well, then we need to embed that content all the way through because content is constantly evolving. You can't say, "I learned science 20 years ago, so I know science." The science of learning is evolving too. You create a profession structurally that embraces all of those things. If you were to look at state policy right now, you wouldn't say it's focused on either of those priorities.

There's a need for leadership at the state level to be able to see the need and then collaboration at the local level to figure out the different ways to address it by capturing and documenting some of the innovation happening. It's an interesting way to think about the evolution of a field: You have some local innovation that begins to inform the larger field and ultimately inform policy. I'm not sure education does a great job of that, does it?

JH: No, in part because I don't think the isolationist quality is just at the teacher level. It's often at the school and district levels as well.

BS: It's interesting to look at other fields to try to understand how we can inform education. Lee Shulman, who was at Stanford, did a lot of that himself. He looked at other professions to see what we could learn from them to inform education. I'd be curious to know how other professions like medicine, engineering and law get informed from the ground up and back down. They might complain it doesn't

happen well either. But you'd like to think that there would be support for effective innovations that would ultimately inform policy.

JH: In general, those professions are more research driven, more evidence driven. Education still isn't.

BS: It isn't, which is a bit of an irony.